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Don't Worry — Ward Churchill Will Solve the Problem

By [Anne D. Neal](#)

The higher education community believes it scored a great victory on June 23 when a coalition of twenty-something organizations, including the American Association of University Professors, issued a [statement](#) supporting academic freedom. Many of their critics have fallen for it and a number of Congressmen have even declared victory. Any praise for the statement, however, must be tempered by an understanding that the people who brought us Ward Churchill won't offer much more than lip service — unless we keep our powder dry.

The statement was promulgated by the American Council on Education and reiterates the importance of the free exchange of ideas, grading free of political bias, grievance procedures for students and faculty who are treated unfairly, and intellectual standards. The declaration acknowledges that "intellectual pluralism" and "academic freedom" are principles widely shared within the academic community. Yet there is nary a nod to the hundreds of widely-publicized cases of political pressure in the classroom that prompted the controversy in the first place.

For years, the higher education establishment has denied that there is a problem and engaged in a series of unpersuasive rationalizations to avoid facing the obvious facts. Roger Bowen of the American Association of University Professors has called studies about faculty political imbalance "wrongheaded" and claimed political affiliations of professors are of little consequence in the classroom. John Millsaps at the University of Georgia agreed: "we have no evidence to suggest that students are being intimidated by professors as regards students' freedom to express their opinions and beliefs." And Lionel Lewis in a recent issue of *Academe* went so far as to argue that political one-sidedness doesn't matter because college has no impact anyway. Nowhere did they argue that students will get a better education if they are exposed to a variety of viewpoints and learn to think for themselves.

Numerous surveys, reports, and case studies documenting the politically [monolithic character](#) of the faculty have mounted. A recent [student survey](#) by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni shows that many students believe they will be penalized if they have a point of view that differs from their professors.

Faced with this mounting evidence – and a growing number of state legislators who have begun holding hearings and passing resolutions — the higher education establishment figured it would be best to have a quick conversion, endorse intellectual “pluralism,” and then go back to business as usual. The strategy is obvious: give lip service, get it out of the papers, do nothing.

Those claiming victory are right in that the first step to recovery is to admit that you have a problem. However, the ACE statement does not admit that there is anything more than a PR problem: “these issues have become public controversies.” It does not address whether there is a lack of intellectual diversity or whether there are any victims of political intolerance at all.

Second, it does not define intellectual pluralism and makes the shocking suggestion that First Amendment freedoms mean different things to different people. These are “complex topics with multiple dimensions,” it says, and it is “impossible to create a single definition or set of standards” and, well, it is simply too much for the unwashed public. Definitions will have to be left to individual campuses, where, presumably, people are smarter.

Third, it does not address any of the specific issues raised by critics: what about unbalanced panel discussions on campus, the hundreds of speech codes prevalent across the country, student newspaper theft, speakers being disinvited or shouted down, the uncivil and intolerant behavior of administrators on campus after campus aimed specifically at students with political views who differ? Not a word on any of these topics.

Fourth, the only section calling for action is very cleverly written. It says, first, that “[n]either students nor faculty should be disadvantaged or evaluated on the basis of their political opinions.” The next sentence calls for “clear” grievance procedures. And action? Not quite. Every college already has clear grievance procedures for students and faculty members. But didn’t the statement say that these should be revised to include protections against political bias? If they had wanted to, they surely could have. No, they stated a general principle, but did not call for revising any grievance procedures. An action that is no action.

Fifth, if you read the fine print, the statement did not even endorse its own principles, claiming only that they “deserve to be stated affirmatively as a basis for discussion ... on campuses and elsewhere.” No action here either.

If they did not admit a problem, and did not define the goal of intellectual pluralism, and did not propose or even hint at specific ways to achieve intellectual pluralism, and really only proposed some discussion topics, what did they say? Leave the problem to us — “the community of scholars.” Isn’t the rhetoric great? The only clear intent of the statement is to tell the public to leave the problem to the institutions. Yes, the people who brought you Ward Churchill, who in fact include Ward Churchill, will solve the problem.

The responsibility for correcting the current situation should, indeed, fall first and foremost to colleges and universities themselves. However, it is the universities that have created the problem, have perpetuated it, continue to minimize it, and have failed to take concrete steps to solve. Indeed, the only apparent response by the higher ed community to the statement has been protests by the AFT,

NEA, and various members of the AAUP.

This statement – so far – is just lip service to intellectual diversity. The reality remains that faculties are politically imbalanced, many course readings and campus speaking events are one-sided, and there is a basic hostility to ideas outside of campus orthodoxies.

It's time for the institutions to take concrete steps to live up to their words.

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